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A Supervisory Newsletter from the Employee Advisory Service (EAS)

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

The Employee Assistance Program to help you manage your most valuable resource— Employees

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Website: <http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

■ Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) help troubled employees so personal problems do not ultimately lead to job loss. Does this mean that they are against disciplinary action? Are EAPs considered unsuccessful if an employee is terminated and does not accept help or follow through with their recommendations?

■ Our agency policy states that using the EAP will not jeopardize an employee's promotional opportunities or job security. Does this mean that no matter what performance problems exist, going to the EAP will make an employee "immune" from certain job actions?

■ My employee was seen by the EAP, but her work problems continue. I feel certain that disciplining her will interfere with her progress. I don't want to be responsible for some sort of relapse, so what should I do?

EAPs are not opposed to discipline. They recognize that discipline is a necessary management tool. Although most employees are helped by EAPs, EAPs recognize that some employees will not accept help, and that unresolved performance issues may lead to disciplinary actions. EAPs are successful when they maximize their visibility, communicate their availability, and reach employees affected by personal problems. The more they reach the better. An employee who rejects the EAP or its recommendations does not affect this definition of success. In some instances, an employee's departure may help an organization become more successful and reduce its exposure to loss. EAPs play a key role in helping ensure that every employee with a problem has the opportunity to remain a part of the organization's success story.

The policy statement you cite is designed to address stigma and protect employees from biases that some persons have against others who seek help. Participating in the EAP does not preclude management interventions to address performance, conduct, or attendance problems, and it does not make an employee "immune" from management actions. The stigma of seeking help for personal problems is not as great as it once was, but it is still an important issue to address. As a result, organizations make assurances to employees that it is safe to use their EAP. Many CEOs, Directors and top management officials in the largest of American companies have disclosed their personal use of the EAP to large groups of employees to demonstrate their approval for the program and to encourage its use.

If your employee relapses for any reason, it is the result of her not doing something necessary to manage her illness properly. A job action is admittedly a stressor, but it is not an excuse for relapse. Understandably, you don't want to feel guilty for interfering with her recovery, but you may face larger problems if you don't act in the best interest of your organization. Discuss the performance issues with your employee, get support from your manager and HRC, and make the best decision. Sometimes it is helpful to inform the EAP

about a pending disciplinary action, or to let the EAP know when it is enacted, but there is no standard requirement for doing so in EAP practice. If you still feel indecisive and anxious, consider meeting with an EA Specialist to work through the conflict. The EAP will not discuss your employee's treatment or personal circumstances, but you may gain insight and clarification on your decision. Be careful not to view the EAP as a roadblock to your decision making.

■ I socialize frequently with my employees. After working hard all day, we like to relax, especially on Friday nights. Can this interfere with my ability to manage troubled employees?

Although occasional social interaction with employees may not disrupt your ability to manage their performance, frequent socializing may cause you to be perceived as a peer. This can interfere with your ability to assert your legitimate authority, direct work, and influence changes in behavior and performance of those you supervise. Familiarity with your employees tempts them to discount or minimize your role as a supervisor. This distorted perception may tempt employees to argue more with you, ignore your recommendations, refuse direction, or act as if you are subordinate to them. You may be proud of your close relationship with your employees, but you must consider what you give up by moving away from a more traditional and detached model of supervision, and whether it ultimately benefits the employer, employee and you.

■ My employee was referred to the EAP a couple of years ago, and subsequently was treated for alcoholism. It's hard to believe, but she has bounced back more than 100 percent. She's my best worker. Is this the way she was before drinking, or the result of treatment?

Most people in long-term recovery would say both. As your employee's addiction grew worse, her ability to perform became more problematic. Depending on how long you have known her, you may never have seen her perform to the degree that demonstrated her full potential. Now that she is in recovery, she must invest in her physical, mental, and spiritual health. This produces great personal returns, some of which may manifest as occupational achievements. Because recovery is a continual process of growth to prevent relapse, a recovering person typically moves beyond prior levels of functioning. This explains why managers frequently observe recovering employees getting "better than well."

NOTES:

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